Tom Foley

CE 5150

**Final Essay**

The topic that interests me, which I choose to be the focus of my final essay, is the integration of video games and social media. In terms of media literacy, I feel that video games have great potential. To be more specific, I think that this is the case because of the great deal of people that engage in MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) games. One of the most well-known examples in this field is the game *World of Warcraft*. If you’re unfamiliar with this game, it currently boasts around 10 million players (Wikipedia, 2013b). That’s a lot of people dressing up their avatars and questing for loot, good times, and glory.

Why is this important to media literacy? It has a lot to do with age groups. Before we get to that, however, we have to ask some more basic questions. Namely, how do we approach the idea of younger generations shifting their attention in general? Moreover, do we stigmatize or embrace such changes? If we do accept the transitional attention migrations of the digital age and millennial mentality, are we equipped to understand and adapt to this social and cultural shift? It’s no great mystery that younger generations are faster and more enthusiastic adapters to new technologies and the opportunities they represent. Here, I argue that we should embrace the shift from purely social forums to those that incorporate socializing and gaming.

When we talk about the concept of media literacy, it’s important to understand what we mean by “media.” One definition, and the primary one with which we are here concerned, is as follows: “A medium of cultivation, conveyance, or expression (Merriam-Webster, 2013).” This may seem self-explanatory, and yet it’s often the case that games are excluded from consideration as an interactive medium. The omission of said forms of expression and interaction is downright bizarre, as many educators are prepared to acknowledge.

To approach this point, we need only consider the great deal of time and study that has been devoted to attempting to understand why students may be more responsive to game-based lesson plans. To wit, in an article on the subject, the author argues that,”…Good media literacy programs are founded on dialogue about the games people play, why we play them, and what concerns nongamers have about game play (Kurt, 3).” How, then, do games in general promote media literacy? How do they potentially better inform students, or better provide them, with opportunities to explore digital citizenship? The answer may be fascinating to those unacquainted with such games.

This requires some background knowledge. Remember *World of Warcraft*, the internet sensation that drew in literally millions of players across the globe and which we mentioned earlier? Within this global-cyber community, an accidental and yet fascinating social study took place. During an update of the software, a virtual but quite lethal epidemic was introduced. In a similar and ironic manner to how real-life viruses propagate, an innocuous oversight of digital evolution (it was a mere software update meant to accommodate a certain game mechanic) suddenly put everyone’s avatar at risk. To elaborate, these were virtual identities within which many players had invested countless- in cases, hundreds- of hours of time.

A virtual bubonic plague struck. The results were both academically and sociologically fascinating:

During the epidemic, normal gameplay was disrupted. Player responses varied but resembled real-world behaviors. Some characters with healing abilities volunteered their services, some lower-level characters who could not help would direct people away from infected areas, some characters would flee to uninfected areas, and some characters attempted to spread the disease to others. Players in the game reacted to the disease as if there was real risk to their well-being (2013a).

In short, the behavior of the players mirrored that which might be anticipated of people in the real world. Some people attempted to help others despite the risk of infection. Some simply secluded themselves. Others vindictively attempted to infect their fellow players.

While I raise these questions mainly for the purposes of academic curiosity (and they are curious), they do lead to greater issues with regard to students and media literacy. Namely, while this area hasn’t been studied in great detail, what are the implications of such social experiments to the developing digital citizenship of students? Caperon argues:

In order to understand and define game literacy, we must first ask a few big questions:

What is the significance of gaming practices for cognitive development and learning? How can

games be leveraged as an important component of digital literacy development (3)?

While many parents eschew or ignore the value of video games in the social and psychological growth of their children, it’s very clear that these forums are avenues for their future development.

Game literacy is indeed media literacy; we are examining forums within which developing minds attempt to discern their place in society. Moreover, their ethical and moral impulses often reflect decision-making processes that are indicative of how they live their daily lives. Later, the author argues:

Collectively, our aim is to encourage researchers and theorists to investigate the importance of gaming with regard to cognition and advance the gaming and learning discourse generally. This goal will be achieved by addressing the key significance of both game-playing and student-centered game-production experiences in learning and in the successful acquisition of comprehensive game-media literacy (13).

It’s impossible to disassociate games, as a central form of socialization for students of many ages, from the greater implications of how they behave within a virtual environment.

To frame the concept of media literacy within the purview of gaming may seem to be a narrow interpretation to take. However, consider this testimony by Squire:

In one class I visited, roughly 20% of the boys in class were playing *World of* *Warcraft*, yet teachers had no idea of what a massively multiplayer game was, or that it was even feasible with today’s technology. They were shocked to learn that their students were going home and logging on to servers with tens of thousands of people from around the world each night (3).

I fully believe that many teachers are unaware of the degree to which many of their students are engaging with a larger online community. Moreover, for those students that community is one shared almost exclusively with their peers. They’re frequently interacting with others of their age and grade; these students have the ability to socialize outside of the normal parameters of school and for many that can be both fulfilling and a way to build their confidence.

I suppose the point I want to make is that engagement in online games (and many students of all ages have them now- even basic handheld systems often incorporate online play) is an early introduction to social media for many students. Media literacy often incorporates current trends which, I feel, many educators don’t always acknowledge. In coming years, students are only more likely to be connected to their peers by way of online gaming. This is not only a fascinating area of study from the standpoint of an educator, but one of which we should be aware given its growing presence in the digital age.

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